

## Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, III

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with the congregations being studied. This, he suggests, will help one read between the lines. Like most history, written congregational history only reveals part of the picture; it must be supplemented by other sources, including discussions with members and former members and firsthand observation of the congregation.

That, it seems, is the message of the series in general—that local history requires a new (or expanded), eclectic, hands-on approach. The focus of all three books is national, and yet they dwell on the validity, the importance, and the excitement of doing local history well. Although these books do not specifically address Iowa history, their approach and methodology should be welcomed by all local historians in the Hawkeye State.

*Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, III*, edited by Thomas Carter and Bernard L. Herman. Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989. viii, 255 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$22.00 paper.

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*Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture, III* is the latest addition to a distinguished series of papers regularly selected for publication from the annual meetings of the Vernacular Architecture Forum (VAF). The papers in this volume are from the 1985–1987 meetings. Up until twelve years ago, local antiquarians dominated the study of vernacular architecture. It was the serious domain only of a school of geographers and occasional individual scholars in various disciplines. In 1979 scholars from numerous backgrounds, academic and applied, organized the VAF to foster interdisciplinary understanding of the diverse common buildings and landscapes known as “vernacular.” The VAF avoided defining the central term, “vernacular architecture,” in order to promote communication. For the same reason, the VAF did not begin a journal; rather it encouraged its members to publish in existing journals. With this liberal mission and mode, the VAF became a significant force for education about vernacular architecture. It is hoped the University of Missouri Press will continue to aid this work by publication of future issues of “*Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture*.”

Given the growing significance of vernacular architecture for many—anthropologists, architects, folklife scholars, cultural geographers, architectural historians, social historians, and historic preservationists, primarily—it is not idle repetition to summarize some of the articles and categorize others for the curious but unfamiliar. The volume’s various approaches can be adapted to study vernac-

ular architecture in Iowa and the Midwest. In the volume's introductory section on methodology, Catherine W. Bishir warns against the class or group values regulating historic preservation today, and Michael Steinitz demonstrates how census records for eighteenth-century Massachusetts help create a more accurate view of a past landscape than is possible from observation of its relics only. The following section on typology has four articles: Allan D. Wallis's history of the mobile home as a cyclical recurrence of several subtypes; Charles E. Martin's explanation of the "half-house" in Kentucky as economic and social response as well as an indication of weakening child-parent relationships; Tom Wolfe and Leonard Garfield's treatment of the origins of the prefabricated Lustron House; and Leslie G. Goat's history of America's early private garages as drawn from the building trades' literature rather than field surveys. The third section comprises four articles on building materials: David Murphy's description of clay's expedience and tradition in central Plains construction; Christopher Martin's outline of persistence and adaptation of Ukranian folk building in western North Dakota; Nancy Van Dolsen's explanation of houses clad in brick in Cumberland County, Maryland, as a response to agriculture's commercialization and as emulation of gentlemen farmers; Pamela H. Simpson's interpretation of the early preference for rock-faced concrete building block as cheap, quick, and easy building material. Sections of four articles each follow on social history and symbolic meaning. Abstracts of the thirty-two unpublished papers from the VAF's 1985-1987 meetings and contributors' biographies close the volume. It is certainly a rich mix.

One caveat is in order, however. Despite the antiestablishment air in which the VAF took root, it has lately shown an unsettling tendency for self-assigned primacy in the study of vernacular architecture. Although the VAF was originally opposed to a journal, the volume under review is the third of a succession of proceedings. This is a welcome departure. However, despite the acknowledgment of other publications with articles on vernacular architecture, the editors of this volume rate it and its predecessors as "the only comprehensive index to current trends and topics in the field" (2). The editors also claim a consensus that premature classification and unified vocabulary are to be avoided because they currently restrict understanding (and, as I suspect the VAF rightly believes, because they probably divert some attention from the architecture to epistemology). But if there is such a consensus, why are classification schemes in some full articles (e.g., Allan D. Wallis [39-41], Leslie G. Goat [72], Fred W. Petersen [176-77]), while other classification schemes are in the abstracts of unpub-

lished papers relegated to the end of the volume (e.g., Peter Goss, David Murphy, Janet A. Null, [231-37])? Some discussion of the distinction between useful and diversionary classification systems and nomenclature is due readers if they are to benefit fully from the editors' decisions about which articles were suitable for full publication and which only for abstracts. The editors' perception of the consensus against undue classification and nomenclature may be shared only by those members of the VAF who appointed the editors. Classification schemes and their nomenclature are useful to both historic preservationists and academicians. Some historic preservationists joined the VAF partly to test classification systems, which give identity to otherwise anonymous places and thereby help enlist the generally uninformed public as well as help counter opponents who would widen the swath for their financial expansion into certain locations by acknowledging only a few monumental landmarks. Classification schemes are also useful initially to academicians who wish to comprehend large numbers of buildings or landscapes before analyzing the classification's complex origins and uses. This is true especially of cultural geographers who delineate areas of ethnic influence by reference to types of vernacular architecture reflecting the ethnicity under examination. In short, future *Perspectives* should be edited in keeping with the VAF's originally liberal manifesto.

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